

"Resurrect Yourself"

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
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<http://firstunitarian.org/podcasts/assembly-april-16-resurrect-yourself/>

Two minutes. We missed it by two minutes. We were four thousand miles from home, atop the famous rocky island of Mont-St.-Michel on the coast of France. It was a place we had seen pictures of our whole lives. And on our only day in town, we missed the last tour of the abbey by two minutes. A rope had been stretched across the arched entryway; there were no human beings around to ask for forgiveness or beg for a late admission. Our little group of travelers had climbed up about twenty stories' worth of stone stairways, and we had gotten distracted by the views and the shimmering of the incoming tide. We looked at each other in stunned silence – to have come so far only to be met by a closed door.



The good news was that I was traveling with goodhearted people. So while there was sadness and regret, there was not any blaming for our collective mistake. And, if we were reading the sign correctly, there was some additional good news. If we were willing to wait around for an hour or so, we could at least see the inside of the abbey church by attending that evening's vespers service. This wasn't part of our original plan, but it seemed worth doing, to both the minister and the non-ministers in our group.

And so, a little more than an hour later, we were very pleased to see a nun, dressed in white and pale blue, appear in the archway. As she removed the rope, she reminded us, first in French and then in English, and very firmly in both languages, that she was offering not a tour, but a prayer service, and that we would be locked inside the gate for the better part of an hour. The dozens of us standing around, with our backpacks and selfie sticks, sure looked a lot more like tourists than like religious pilgrims. But we all nodded, and lined up so the nun could process each of us through the metal detector. Then we climbed many more stairs, up to the abbey's church.

Vespers is a religious service held at the unwinding of the day instead of at the beginning, with music and reflection. And in the middle of our busy vacation, in the middle of global tragedies and travesties, the vespers at Mont-St.-Michel provided a welcome resting space. Other than "mon ami" and "savoir-faire," we didn't understand the words. No matter. The dozen or so nuns and monks sang most of the service, a cappella, which literally means "in the style of a chapel." No sound but human voices,

lifting up at a spot where people had been singing together for more than a thousand years. The beauty of the harmonies was timeless and universal, and the value of a moment of stillness knows no creed.

At the end of the service, the nuns and monks headed back toward their quarters, and we nascent pilgrims were allowed to linger and gaze up at the narrow gothic windows, and we took pictures from a terrace that felt miles above the sea. We may not have gotten an official tour, but we did not leave unfulfilled.

I managed to linger a few moments longer than everyone else. Being the last one down the stairs gave me the opportunity to say hello to the same nun who had welcomed us. She and I certainly had different lifestyles and very different theologies, but we had the shared bond of a life of religious service and an appreciation for vespers. I thanked her for the beautiful singing and mentioned that I was a minister. She surprised me by being a bit chatty; I imagine the monastic life could leave one hungry for conversation. She asked me whether her announcements in English had been understood, and I assured her that she had done a fine job. I wished her a good Holy Week, and she wished me the same. I didn't have the heart to tell her how much less busy my Holy Week would be than hers.

From one perspective, Easter and Holy Week are easier if you're a humanist. Growing up Catholic, I always felt like we had to go to church several hours a day from Thursday through Easter Sunday. Around here, we have a candy hunt for the kids, but that's only an hour long and completely optional, like everything else about the most important Christian holiday. Because Christianity is just one of the many sources from which we learn.

From another perspective, the lack of Easter leaves those of us who are humanists with more work – harder theological work. Without a ready-to-go story of resurrection available to us, we have to create our own meaning for this experience we call life. For those of us who may not believe that salvation is available by external divine means, how do we save ourselves when we need a little saving? When the systems of the dominant culture do not reflect our theology, what must we create, and how creative must we be?

Before we tackle that, I want to take a look at some of the history of the holiday we know as Easter. Not the pagan elements, which are numerous – even the word Easter is pagan, which is why some Christians call it Resurrection Sunday instead. I want to look at the Christian history of the holiday. I want to do this because portrayals of Holy Week once underwent a profound shift, one that explains a lot about the history of western

civilization. And it's a shift that can explain a lot about the country and the world we find ourselves living in right now.

I learned about this shift thanks to the work of Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock and the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker. They wrote a book called "Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire." It's a critical and challenging look at what is generally taught about Easter.

In their research, Brock and Parker traveled to the Mediterranean and visited the oldest churches they could find, some dating back to only a few hundred years after the Gospels were written. They talked to historians and experts in religious art. And what they found was this: For almost the first thousand years of Christianity, there are no images of the dead, dying, or bleeding Jesus. They found no imagery of Jesus hanging on a cross, even though we may think of such images as being ubiquitous in Christian churches and art.

Instead, Brock and Parker found that, for the first thousand years after the first Easter, images in churches were of paradise. "During their first millennium," they write, "Christians filled their sanctuaries with images of Christ ... as a shepherd, a teacher, a healer, an enthroned god; he is an infant, a youth, and a bearded elder. But he is never dead. When he appears with the cross, he stands in front of it, serene, resurrected. The world around him is ablaze with beauty. These are images of paradise – paradise in this world...."

They describe some of the ancient churches they visited. In Rome and Ravenna, the images "captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world... Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the world's luminosity. The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful."

I don't know about you, but to me that all sounds pretty nice. Many of the images they talk about could be part of a humanist celebration of religious naturalism, or could be hanging on the wall right here. And although we don't use the word "liturgy" much around here, we are in fact hoping each Sunday to provide you with an aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experience of life in the present. This all makes me think that if I had met a French nun at Mont-St.-Michel a thousand years ago, the gaps between our theological worldviews may have been smaller than they are today, with the Church being closer to nature and more focused on the present world.

So what happened? What turned these images around? What prompted the western Church to focus more on Good Friday's brutal execution rather than the Resurrection of Easter Sunday?

Brock and Parker were on a mission to find out. They write this: "After searching in vain for images of Jesus's dead body in the ancient churches of the Mediterranean, we found the corpse of Jesus in northern Europe." They located the earliest surviving crucifix, sculpted from oak late in the 10th century, in a side chapel in a cathedral in Germany.

Soon after this crucifix was carved, they tell us, "depictions of the crucified Christ proliferated in Europe and became increasingly grotesque and bloody. By the end of the medieval period, Jesus was routinely displayed being tortured in a grim landscape.... At the threshold of nearly every Gothic cathedral, worshippers passed under a carving depicting the end of time. ... Heaven was a walled city. Hell was a huge serpent swallowing its human prey, a grinding machine, or a raging fire into which demons armed with pitchforks tossed anguished souls."

"Why did Christians turn from a vision of paradise in this life to a focus on the Crucifixion and final judgment?" the authors ask. "How did images of terror, torture, and the desolation of the earth come to permeate the religious imagination of Western Christianity?"

Here's their answer: "A thousand years after Jesus, the brutal logic of empire twisted the celebration of his life into a perpetual reenactment of his death. [That first crucifix] was carved by descendants of the Saxons, who were baptized against their will by the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne during a three-decade campaign of terror. Charlemagne's armies slaughtered all who resisted, destroyed shrines representing the Saxons' tree of life, and deported 10,000 Saxons from their land." Their art, according to Brock and Parker, reflected the violence of the Christianity they experienced.

These changes, the authors write, "coincided with a shift in the Christian prohibition against the shedding of human blood. For centuries, the church had taught that participation in warfare was evil, that killing broke the fifth commandment. But then a new age began — one in which the execution of Jesus would become a sacrifice to be repeated, first on the Eucharistic altar and then in the ravages of a full-blown holy war."

As we know today, that's how power often works. Authoritarians create the storyline they need to justify the things they want to do. In this case, "holy war" stopped being a contradiction in terms and instead became a way of life in Europe for centuries. And

that ethic of conquest and violence was exported, first to the Holy Land during the Crusades and then through colonialism to all the continents of the globe. We are still very much living with that legacy. It's perfectly OK to draw blood or drop bombs or declare war if the loving, violent God is on your side. And fostering a fear of the other or of hell is a nearly foolproof way to intensify political power.

Fortunately, today's Christianity is of course much more diverse than it was when the monks first started building that abbey at Mont-St.-Michel. For example, our Christian neighbors here along the avenue are much more about peace than war and are quite focused on the concerns of this world. There is hope to be found in the fact that much of Christianity is independent from and in opposition to the Charlemagnes of today (one of whom may be leading France as soon as next month). And there is hope to be found in the fact that if Christianity shifted so radically in the past, there's a chance it could shift again in the future.

Over here on our more secular side of the street, we have our own ancestors, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors, who more than 200 years ago did things like refusing to believe in hell and starting to question biblical miracles. Our Transcendentalist ancestors were breaking new ground in exploring the divinity of the self and learning from world religions far beyond Christianity. The concept of salvation broadened dramatically, no longer something achieved only through a rigid set of beliefs. Salvation became something guaranteed to all in the next life (for the Universalists) or found within ourselves (for the Transcendentalists) or achieved in this life by right living (salvation by character, the Unitarians called it). Salvation wasn't just for Easter anymore.

And so we here on our hill are the beneficiaries of hundreds of years of creativity in religion, creativity in theology and philosophy, creativity in community. When I talk about this kind of creativity, I'm not just talking about cleverness or imagination, although those are undoubtedly important. What I mean by creativity is true creation, when we bring something into being that wasn't there before, when we will and work something into existence. Creating sound where there was silence, creating an experience where there was inertia, breathing into life a green garden where there was only dirt, letting a paintbrush or a pencil eradicate the emptiness of a page.

This congregation is the product of such creativity. John Dietrich helped create a modern humanistic theology where there was a philosophical void. And the folks in Minneapolis who hired Dietrich as their minister in 1916 had created a humanist-leaning congregation where no such thing had existed. This place has offered a form of

salvation – intellectual, social, societal – for longer than any of our lifetimes, because wise and generous people got creative.

We now live in a time when simply creating anything has become something of a rare and radical act in our prosperous consumer society. Facebook feeds and ads all over TV and the Internet affirm the value of defining yourself by your consumption – *look at what I bought*. This is a profound change for humanity. For most of human history, people had to create everything for themselves, from scratch, with the materials available – growing their own food, weaving their own clothing, building huts and houses with their own hands, and the only music they ever heard was what they themselves could sing. I don't want to romanticize this much harder way of living, especially because it's still the case for countless people around the world. But something is lost when individuals only receive the creations of others and create very little for themselves. As proven by every kid who's ever exclaimed, "look what I made!", we get a little bit of salvation, a little bit of resurrection, whenever we step into the role of creator.

And there's quite a bit of science to back this up. There isn't proof that you will be brought back from the beyond or saved from eternal damnation. But there is research that shows that creativity can revivify you, and it can help save you from a host of earthly ills. In one study, in New Zealand, older adults who wrote expressively recovered from biopsies faster than those who didn't write. In another study, cancer and chronic illness patients who created visual art such as paintings, photographs, and pottery experienced less anxiety, stress, and depression. And the benefits of participating in the creation of music are huge, ranging from better moods to improved cognition and even to stronger immune systems in HIV and cancer patients. Creativity is a spiritual practice with measurable practical outcomes, outcomes of the sort that many of us could use right now.

None of this is to suggest that we should all run off to the monastery and lock ourselves away in cloisters and garrets with easels and choir books. As tempting as that may be, this is precisely the wrong time in our national and global life to go on any kind of extended retreat. Creativity in private can be essential and renewing. But creativity in public is a must right now. We need not only artistic creation, but we also are seeing the political creation of new relationships and alliances where none previously existed. And we are seeing the creation of important, frequent protest. All of this is essential creativity, for our country's salvation. We must continue to create resistance at every opportunity.

I want to close by pointing out that one of the great things about this day and age is that creativity can happen just about anywhere. You don't have to be able to afford a leave of absence or a writing room or a potter's wheel. You can write a poem or a letter to the editor on the bus with your phone. You can use social media to create a new connection between activists who don't know each other. And you can be all kinds of creative right here on a Sunday morning, from making food in our kitchen to creating new relationships in coffee hour to making music with your human voice right in this room. There are many, many ways to resurrect yourself and save our world. And Easter Sunday is a great time to start.